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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine how status was indicated by the use of directives in homogeneous groups of adolescent females and whether differences in status designation existed which could be attributed to either class or ethnicity. Three groups of ten to twelve-year-olds (middle-class white, working-class white, and working-class black) completed twenty-four natural interactions, providing 983 directives and 200 randomly selected responses. An index was developed to assess the coercion of the directives and compliance of responses, and the resulting analysis provided a coercion level mean for each participant which was compared to her sociometric rank by the Spearman Rank Coefficient of Correlation. A similar comparison was calculated between the sociometric rank and number of directives issued and received and the compliance of responses issued and received. A second analysis used chi squares to compare the selection of component options within the possibilities for directive construction by each girl to every other girl in her group and across group lines to girls in the same status position. Findings indicated that some uses of directives to indicate status could be attributed to socioeconomic class and some to ethnicity and that specific component selections were associated with sociometric status regardless of class or ethnicity. (Author)

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A SOCIOCULTURAL COMPARISON OF THE USE OF DIRECTIVES BY ADOLESCENT FEMALES

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A SOCIOCULTURAL COMPARISON OF THE USE OF DIRECTIVES
BY ADOLESCENT FEMALES

Recent sociolinguistic investigation has probed the relationship between two interacting phenomena: linguistic manifestations of politeness (Lakoff, 1973; Brown and Levinson, 1974) and the effects of status on the selection of linguistic alternatives (Brown and Gillman, 1960; Brown and Ford, 1961; Ervin-Tripp, 1972, 1976; Dirksen, 1975b). It was the intention of my study to pursue those research strains in a sociocultural comparison of the use of directives to indicate status in homogeneous groups of adolescent females. Existing adult studies have indicated that high status results in the issuing of less polite (i.e. more coercive) linguistic alternatives and in the receipt of more polite alternatives. Because most such studies have been conducted among white middle-class adults, the present study attempted to examine the question of status and politeness as they related to adolescents from two ethnic groups (black and white) and two socioeconomic classes (working and middle). Directives were selected as central because of indications that they carry a heavy load of social meaning (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Brown and Levinson, 1974; Lakoff, 1973; Dirksen, 1975a), because early studies indicated that they might be a source of social class difference in alternative selection (Turner, 1971; Cook-Gumperz, 1973) and because they appeared to be a common speech form in all-child groups (Montes, 1976).

Method of Elicitation

The difficulty inherent in the study of language use by children and by non-standard dialect speakers has been adequately documented by

Labov (1972a, 1972b) who has pointed out the serious weaknesses of the strictly controlled experimental format. However, the ethnographic approaches of Lein (1975) and Ervin-Tripp (1976) and the "self-as-informant" approach of Lakoff (1973) appeared too loosely constructed for the rigorous sociocultural comparison, limited in time and scope, which my study entailed. Therefore, I attempted to devise a methodological compromise which would combine the volume of data and the scientific rigor of the experiment with the uninhibited speech of natural interaction. I first limited the population of the study to fifteen females between the ages of ten and twelve and selected participants for three groups of five members each. Decisions concerning group size and age limitations were based on a pilot study consisting of larger groups of a greater age span which indicated that five-member groups provided sufficient variety of interaction patterns (dyads, triads and combinations) but could be interpreted better on recordings than larger groups which resulted in unanalyzable simultaneous talk. The pilot also indicated that ten to twelve year olds participated more actively in group conversations than younger children and would, therefore, provide more data. It further indicated that by age ten, the children had mastered a relatively complex directive system which appeared to be responsive to social status variables (Dirksen, 1975a). Females were used because they exhibited greater interest in conversation than their male counterparts, because they would provide less informant-researcher distance than males, and because the language of adolescent females has been inadequately studied.

Participants were not selected randomly, as most research methods demand, becuase of the difficulty any middle-class white researcher has in

examining the language of black children. Following the work of Labov (1972a), I attempted to select children who would be comfortable talking with and for me because of a history of pleasant interactions. The black group was selected from participants at a local community center with which I have been affiliated for several years. Girls were included who could clearly be classified as working-class by Warner's Index of Status Characteristics (1960), whose parents agreed to their participation, and who had been acquainted with the researcher and with each other for an extended period. Working-class white participants were selected in the same way, using the same criteria. The middle-class white group was selected on the basis of each child's demonstrable membership in the middle-class, previous acquaintance with other group members, and previous acquaintance with the researcher. Although complete control of intra-group familiarity was impossible, I attempted to select children in each group who were previously acquainted to a similar extent. Best friends and sisters were not selected because of the possibility that their interaction would be different on the basis of factors not covered by the study. Although a middle-class black group would have added a meaningful dimension to the investigation, the community in which the research was conducted did not have an adequate representation of that population to provide participants of the age and sex desired.

In order to elicit spontaneous speech which would contain a sufficient number of directives for analysis and provide comparability across class and ethnic lines, I structured twenty-four interaction tasks. Each group met three hours a day for four days to complete the tasks in settings considered to be comfortable and appropriate for specific groups. Tasks

included such activities as each child teaching the others a craft, the entire group working together on one craft project, participants working individually on crafts with shared materials, and group members working together on purely verbal projects such as making up a group story. Although I was present at each session to initiate the activities and to participate in some interaction, only all-child conversations were analyzed. Following the approach of Gumperz (1964) and Labov(1972a, 1972b), I withdrew both verbally and physically and taped the subsequent interactions.

Method of Analysis

Some seventeen hours of conversations were subsequently analyzed from which I extracted and transcribed 983 directives and 200 randomly selected responses. The primary purposes of the study were to determine how intra-group status was indicated by the participants through their use of directives and to ascertain whether status was indicated differently by different class or ethnic groups. In order to determine the intra-group social status hierarchy, a sociometric measure was taken at different points throughout the study, consisting of five questions designed to determine group leadership. Each individual was ranked according to her resulting intra-group sociometric status.

To facilitate and objectify the inter and intra-group comparisons of the relative coercion of directives and the relative compliance of responses, I extracted information from relevant studies of directives (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Brown and Levinson, 1974; Montes, 1976), examined elements within my own data, and formalized an index for the quantification of directive coercion and response compliance. The complexity of the instrument

precludes its thorough discussion at this point. The following summary will suffice. The coercion level index analyzed each directive in terms of its three major components: the grammatical form of the principal verb, the apparent recipient of the benefit of the action, and the type of action requested. Four levels of coercion were defined within each component based on a consideration of the placement of the directive along three interacting continua: power to solidarity to supplication, involuntariness of response options to voluntariness of response options, and unambiguous message form to ambiguous message form. Each level received a point value with selections from the coercive end of each continua (power, involuntariness, lack of ambiguity) receiving the highest ratings. Because of the centrality of grammatical form to the question of coercion, the levels within this component were scaled from two to eight; all other component levels were ranked from one to four. Coercive and noncoercive modulations as described by Ervin-Tripp (1976) and as discovered in the transcribed data were also given the point value of +/-1. Directives in the study ranged in coerciveness from a total of two to twenty-four.

Each directive in the taped data was analyzed according to the coercion level index, and a coercion level mean was computed for each participant for the directives she issued and for those she received. The randomly selected responses were also quantified in terms of their compliance, and a response compliance mean was computed for each participant in terms of the responses she issued and those she received. The participants were then ranked in comparison with their own groups in terms of their four means, and those rankings were compared to their sociometric ranks by the Spearman

Rank Coefficient of Correlation. Each girl was also ranked according to the number of directives she issued and the number she received, and each of these ranks was compared to her sociometric rank by the Spearman Rank Coefficient of Correlation.

Findings of First Analysis

This analysis revealed both class and ethnic differences in the use of directives to indicate status in homogeneous groups. Status in the black group was marked by directive use in two ways not shared by either white group. One, for the black group there was a positive correlation between sociometric rank and the number of directives issued (r_s .9 significant at the .05 level). Two, there was also a significant correlation between the status of the speaker and the compliance of the responses she received (r_s .8). Therefore, status was significant to the black speakers in determining the number of directives they would issue and to the black addressees in determining appropriate responses.

Both working-class groups demonstrated one characteristic not shared by the middle-class group: They used both highest and lowest status as a basis for issuing highly coercive directives and middle status as a basis for issuing the least coercive directives. Therefore, the lowest status person in both working-class groups exhibited behavior which was more similar to the highest status person than to anyone else in the group. This configuration was divergent from both the adult model and the profile of the middle-class group.

Middle-class participants marked status in two ways not shared by either working-class group. One, they demonstrated a positive correlation

between sociometric rank and the number of directives received (r_s .77); and two, they exhibited a positive correlation between sociometric rank and the coerciveness of directives received (r_s 1). Therefore, they indicated their recognition of the intra-group status of fellow participants by addressing fewer directives to higher ranking persons and correspondingly more directives to lower ranking persons. They also indicated the status of their addressees by issuing less coercive directives to persons in higher status positions and correspondingly more coercive directives to lower ranking addressees. However, for this group, status was not significant in determining compliance. Instead, middle-class participants responded more compliantly to non-coercive message form than to status of speaker. Middle-class children, in contrast to working-class children, recognized the status of their fellow interactants and considered that status in determining the number and coerciveness of the directives they would address to certain parties. However, the individual's status in the middle-class group did not play a role in determining how many directives she would issue, or in how coercive her directives might be. It also did not play a role in regulating responses to directives.

Second Method of Analysis

A second analysis of the data consisted of an examination of each participant's selection of alternatives within the three major directive components. Chi squares were computed to compare each girl's selections to those of every other girl in her group. Extensive comparisons were then made between the top, middle, and last ranked participants sociometrically.

Profiles of characteristic selections for participants within specific status ranks were then compared across group lines non-statistically, and chi squares were computed to compare each group to every other group.

Findings of the Second Analysis.

The following findings relate to the characteristic selection of directive components by persons in specific status ranks.[1] The highest status person in each group was characterized by the use of the most imperative verbs (the most coercive form) and the fewest Let/Let's forms (a selection which is ranked second in coercion). She also selected the fewest speaker benefit directives and the most mutual benefit directives. Finally, she asked for permission by selecting the allow option less than anyone else in her group. (For a complete breakdown of the possible options within each component and the point value of each, see Appendix A.) The middle status person in each group was characterized by using the fewest imperatives and the most Let/Let's forms. She also characteristically used the most statements, made almost as many mutual benefit requests as the first ranked person, and made the fewest addressee benefit requests. Finally, she issued the fewest perform directives, the most delay directives, and the most allow directives in her group. The last ranked person in each group was more similar to the first ranked person than to the middle ranked person in that she characteristically used a large percentage of imperatives

[1]This presentation of the findings is non-statistical because of the complexity of the statistical explanation. However, the chi square values for comparisons among individuals and among groups are available. Only those chi squares which were significant at the .05 level were further analyzed and presented above.

and few Let/Let's forms. She issued fewer statements than either the first or third ranked participants. She issued the most speaker benefit directives, the fewest mutual benefit directives and the most addressee benefit directives. She issued more perform directives than any other participant, and she issued almost no delay directives.

In cross-class and cross-ethnic comparisons of component selections, the following findings emerged which could be associated with class: Working-class participants made greater use of imperatives than did middle-class participants. Working-class participants issued more directives intended to bring about mutual benefit than did middle-class participants. Middle-class interactants more frequently used coercive intonation. Finally, middle-class participants used OK twice as often as working-class participants. The following findings were associated with the ethnicity of the participants: One, white participants used the statement form significantly more often than did the black participants. Two, the white groups used significantly more modal auxiliaries than the black group. Three, black participants used the modulation better more frequently than did white speakers. Four, black speakers more frequently used non-coercive intonation than white speakers; and five, black participants used address terms considerably more than did white participants. One finding was considered important because it indicated no difference among the groups: All three groups used approximately the same number of explanations to clarify their directives.

Discussion and Implications

Because the use of directives to indicate status in the groups studied differed from the adult model of directive use described in the

literature and because the use by each group had unique features, there is a possibility for misinterpretation between children and adults and between children from different class and ethnic backgrounds in the use of directives. For example, whereas lower status adults use less coercive forms when addressing higher status adults, only the middle-class children in the study followed this pattern. The working-class children with low status used more coercive forms upward in an attempt to make their requests powerful and unambiguous. It was assumed by this difference in models that, whereas adults value social marking over effeciency in attaining directive compliance, working-class children value efficiency in communication over social marking.

There was also information in the study which indicated areas of possible problems in cross-class interactions. Since the white middle-class is still the most powerful reference group in the institutions where classes and ethnic groups are most frequently integrated, working-class children are subject to misinterpretation of their use of the directive system since it does not fully coincide with the middle-class model. Because directives carry a heavy load of social meaning, misinterpretation of the children's sociolinguistic rules for directive formation can be crucial to one in a minority power position such as a child in school. In the study, middle-class children issued less coercive directives to children with higher intra-group social status, and they issued fewer directives to higher ranking participants. However, this was not the case with the working-class children. This difference indicates a different utilization of social status information in the creation of directives, a difference which has serious implications.

Within her own context, the working-class child forms directives according to a system which does not differentiate high status from low status in terms of coerciveness. As long as her fellow interactants are utilizing the same system, there is no confusion; however, when that child interacts with representatives from the mildle-class who do mark social status with lack of coerciveness, she is in danger of misinterpretation Because social situations are created as well as reflected by the use of language, a child using a highly coercive form with a fellow interactant of high status could be perceived as attempting to create a social hierarchy in which the high status person is brought down to a level below the speaker because this is the way the rule functions in the middle-class system. Therefore, the working-class child is viewed as abrupt and rude, even though she is merely processing social information according to her own rules which work sufficiently well in her own context. Because minority ethnic and class children must interact with middle-class white children and adults at school, it is important that their directive system be understood so that their intentions in interaction will not be misconstrued.

The data also revealed some cross-ethnic differences in the use of directives to designate status. Only the black group indicated a correlation between intra-group status and the number of directives issued by participants. Although this does not imply any difficulties in inter-group interaction, it does imply a difference in the functioning of the sociolinguistic rule for directive formation. The black children responded to their own status in a different fashion than did the white participants. This difference might have resulted from the role of the adolescent female in the black community, and again, this is suggestive of a need for further investigation.

Responses to directives also indicated differences between the children in the study and adults as described by previous studies and between the various groups of children studied. The status of the directive receiver was not a factor in any of the groups in determining whether or not the receiver would comply. Although the question of responses has not been directly dealt with in most adult studies, there is the implication in adult data that lower status is a factor in non-compliance. Because the status intervals of the participants in the present study were relatively small, it is not assumed that children will not recognize their own status as a factor in responding to directives issued by adults. Nevertheless, these data imply a difference in the use of directives to indicate status between children and adults.

Cross-ethnic examination of the data on responses revealed the following differences. The favorable response of the middle-class white children to non-coercive directive form implies an interesting difference in the use of directives. The over-all coercion level for the black group was slightly higher than that of the midldle-class white group. Furthermore, the white group was slightly less compliant than the black group. Also in repeating directives, black participants had a tendency to make repititions increasingly coercive whereas the repeat tendency for the middle-class white group was the reverse. Therefore, interactions between black children utilizing one system and white children using a different system could be quite complex. The black speaker would have a tendency to be more coercive initially, and the white addressee would have a tendency to respond non-compliantly to a coercive message form. If the black speaker chose to

repeat the unsuccessful directive, she would probably couch it in even more coercive terms which would be less likely to achieve compliance than the first form. Problems with this mismatch of systems are obvious.

Furthermore, the working-class black group, the status of the directive sender was a significant factor in determining whether or not it received compliance. This difference between the black and white system studied introduces an additional complication to the interaction of the hypothetical middle-class white and working-class black children discussed above.

Directive component selection further demonstrated implications for cross-ethnic interactions. The greater use of the statement by white participants may indicate something basic about differences in directive formation by members of different ethnic groups. Although the data presented in this study are inconclusive, this finding suggests possibilities for further investigation. If the black children do not select the statement option, their directives may frequently be more coercive than anticipated by the white model since the grammatical form option is the basis of directive formation. The statement is a very subtle form w which is ambigous and voluntary. It allows options considered significant in conventional politeness. Limited use of this form could handicap a black child attempting to communicate appropriately with whites. If black children do not make frequent use of this form, they also may not recognize statement directives addressed to them by teachers or other whites with whom they communicate.

Differences across ethnic lines in the use of the additions and modifications also have implications for cross-ethnic communication. Black participants appeared to be designating addressess in a substantially different manner than were the white participants. White speakers made

very limited use of the address term. This would suggest that they were indicating which participant was being addressed in some non-verbal fashion such as eye-contact, body orientation, or proximity. If the black group members were making use of non-verbal means of indicating addressees, they apparently did not feel that such indication was adequate. Unless there is a great deal of redundancy in the black system which provides both verbal and non-verbal means of designating addressee, the data of the present study imply that blacks use verbal means and may not recognize the non-verbal means. Closer examination of the non-verbal aspects of addressee designation by both groups is suggested.

The most signigicant difference which could be attributed to class in the selection of directive components was the working-class children's greater orientation toward mutual benefit in directive construction. The selection of this option implied a greater degree of group cooperation on the part of the working-class children and a greater concern for reaching individual rather than group goals on the part of the middle-class children. The area of group goal significance as a function of working-class background as opposed to individual-goal significance as a result of middle-class background merits further investigation.

Because minority class and ethnic children interact with middle-class white children and adults almost daily, and because directive use carries a significant amount of crucial social meaning, it is imperative that the use of directives by minority children be studied and understood. Otherwise, these children may pay a heavy social penalty in their interactions with members of the middle-class.

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APPENDIX A

COERCION LEVEL INDEX SUMMARY
AND EXAMPLE CALCULATIONS

Summary of Instrument:

A. Grammatical Form		B. Direction of Benefit		C. Action Requested	
Imperative	8	Speaker	4	Stop /Don't	4
Let/Let's	6	3rd Party	3	Perform	3
Question	4	Mutual	2	Delay	2
Statement	2	Addressee	1	Allow	1

D. Modifications and Additions

Coercive +1	Non-Coercive -1
penalty	deflection
repeat	intonation
gotta	tag question
hafta	modal auxiliary
sposta	address term
better	politeness marker
expletive	indefinite pronoun
intonation	2nd person plural pronoun
	1st person plural pronoun
	well
	all right
	OK
	just
	explanation

Application of Instrument:

1. Kay, give me that paint.

   A. Grammatical form: imperative = 8
   B. Direction of benefit: speaker= 4
   C. Action requested: perform = 3
   D. modification: address term =-1

   Coercion level 14

2. Let Henri finish what she was sayin'.

   A. Grammatical form: Let =6
   B. Direction of benefit:3rd party =3
   C. Action requested: allow =1
   D. modification: none =0

   Coercion level 10